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ABSTRACT

Family day care is generally defined as the care of six or fewer unrelated children in a caregiver's home. However, there are no national standards or regulations for family or group child care homes, and the definitions of family child care vary from state to state. Regulated providers have been rated as more sensitive and observed to offer more responsive care than nonregulated caregivers. It is estimated that the number of nonregulated family child care providers may be four to six times greater than the number of regulated providers. "Nonregulated" does not necessarily mean illegal, as many states have "exempt categories" of regulation. License validators must recognize the importance of diversity among family child care providers and promote professionalism, as put forth by the Family Child Care Accreditation Program. (BGC)

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FAMILY CHILD CARE: PROFESSIONALISM WITH DIVERSITY

Family child care - what wonderful pictures the mind can visualize when these words are spoken. Over the last twenty years, it has been my pleasure to visit many family child care homes throughout the United States. The answers to the question "what is family child care?" depict as much diversity as the various locations, neighborhoods and families who live there.

Family Child Care - What Is It?

"Care in the home of a provider is the most prevalent form of child care for young children with employed mothers in the United States today." (Galinsky, Howes, Kontos & Shinn, 94) Generally, family child care is defined as the care of six or fewer unrelated children in the home of the caregiver. Large or group family child care homes usually care for seven to twelve unrelated children in the home of the caregiver with a full time assistant required at all times. These definitions vary from state to state, depending upon the individual state regulations (CF, 93).

There are no national standards or regulations for family or group child care homes. As reported in The Children's Foundation 1994 Family Day Care Licensing Study, there are approximately 288,000 regulated family child care providers in the fifty states and the District of Columbia, of which approximately 23,000 are large or group family child care homes. Regulated providers are rated as more sensitive and observed to be offering more responsive care than nonregulated...caregivers. (Galinksy, Howes, Kontos & Shinn, 94)

Unfortunately, the estimated number of nonregulated family child care providers may be four to six times greater. It is important to remember that nonregulated does not necessarily mean illegal since many states have what are called "exempt categories" of regulation. This refers to those family child care providers who are not required to become regulated by the state because of the few number of children they provide care for [ex: Pennsylvania exempts individuals caring for one to three children] or because they are a relative such as a grandmother or aunt.

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Profile of a Provider

The average family child care provider - what are the characteristics and qualities? First, most providers are women -over 95% - although the number of men is growing. The average White provider is 25-35 years of age and has a high school education, while the average Hispanic provider is 35-45 years of age with less than a high school education. African-American providers generally are in the same age category as the White provider, but with the educational level of the Hispanic provider. (NCCS, 90; CCIP, 92)

Eighty percent of White and Hispanic providers are married, while only 50% of African-American providers are. (NCCS, 90) Most family child care providers have two or three children of their own. (Kontos, 91).

Family child care providers are among the lowest wage-earners in our country. The average income for regulated providers in 1990 was just $10,944 per year, while for nonregulated homes it was even lower at $5,163 per year. (NCCS, 90). One of the most startling statistics is that in 1970 the average hourly wage for a family child care provider was just $1.29 and twenty years later in 1990 it was only $.06 higher - $1.35. (Kontos, 91) This unfortunately substantiates the well known theory that providers are subsidizing the child care for working parents in the United States.

The Heart of Family Child Care

The heart of family child care is its diversity. The word "diverse" is defined as "capable of assuming various and different forms; it means variety." The picture painted above of the average family child care provider really doesn't tell us what it is and what it looks like in Florida, Alaska, California, Texas, New York, Mississippi, or Iowa --- how it is different and how it is the same. The real picture of family child care is what makes it unique in each of those places and within the individual homes of the providers. As much as families are alike and different, so are family child care providers.

This is a profession where we celebrate the differences, as well as the similarities; where flexibility and diversity are encouraged and supported. One of the greatest fears about "becoming professional" is that providers will all begin to look alike, losing their individuality and diversity.

The Important Role of Family Child Care

Family child care is the preferred choice of out-of-home child care for children three and under by parents and child development specialists. It also has great advantages for before and after school care. One of the most important characteristics qualities is that it most resembles the child's own home. In a recent study of family child care, it was once again determined that parents prefer to choose child care in their own neighborhood that mirrors their socio-economic status and ethnicity (Galinsky, Howes, Kontos & Shinn, 94). Family child care offers one-to-one attention, nurturing, extended siblings, and lots of love. It is the "family" in family child care that is so important.

The families who use family child care homes come from many ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds, and represent differing abilities and income levels. They have values, experiences, and needs that are similar, and also some that are very different. One of the great qualities of family child care is that providers try to meet and respect the "individualities" of the families.

The Family Child Care Professional

"Professional" is defined as "worthy of high standards; having much experience and great skill in a specific role; authority, expert, specialist, and veteran." The professional family child care provider is one who operates her/his home in a quality fashion. This is interpreted to mean that the provider engages in a continual growth process to improve individual skills, to improve the quality of care to the children, and to enhance and encourage the parent/provider partnership.

Providers who attend workshops and conferences, go to training classes, take early childhood education college courses, and/or participate in accreditation or credentialling programs are developing and renewing their professional commitment in order to better offer quality care to children. In addition, the provider feels better about her/himself and establishes a positive relationship with the parent(s).

The Diversity of Family Child Care

Family child care comes in many different forms. Some providers have big single homes with large fenced-in yards. Others live in row or town homes with little or no yard. Still other providers live in apartments or mobile homes and use the playground down the street. These are the faces of family child care.

Some providers live in rural areas with long distances to drive to stores, schools, training, or just to visit other providers. Others live in housing developments where there are many neighbors close by with easy access to stores, schools and each other. Some providers live in very urban areas with stores and schools just down the street and many multi-family dwellings in close proximity. This too is family child care.

Many providers have cars or vans to take the children on field trips, while others take walking trips or use public transportation to get to the zoo or the firehouse. In like fashion, parents may be bringing their child to the family day care home in car or van, or using the bus or subway.

It is not uncommon for providers in Alaska to find a moose in their front yard or for the children to see buffalo or mountain sheep. Snow is an every day part of their experience. Providers in Southern California, Texas and Florida spend a large portion of their day outside because the weather is warm and sunny. There are also many Hispanic, Latino or Chicano families so providers may be bilingual. In New York City, more than 50% of family child care providers live in apartments. They walk with the children through the neighborhood to the park

or the firestation. In Metropolitan Washington, DC family child care providers come from many different countries and cultures, and speak different languages. These providers have children of many cultures in their home. All this is family child care in the United States.

The family child care providers themselves are similar in some ways and different in others. One of the unique qualities of family child care is its "flexibility." Some providers are married, while others are single parents. One provider may choose to open her/his family child care home at 5:30 AM to accommodate a working parent who has to be at work at 6 AM; or a provider may remain open until 7 PM to help a parent who has a long commuting distance to work.

Some providers have very structured, preschool-like programs, while others have a more general, informal plan for their day. There are providers who do only infant care, before and after school care, sick child care, or substitute and back-up care. Still others prefer to only provide care part-time, night or weekend care. There is other specialized care such as those who care for AIDS babies, the children of migrant farm workers, or homeless families. Family child care homes and providers have many diverse "faces."

In addition, providers "wear more than one hat." They are leaders in their local, state or national family child care association. They may be trainers or mentors for other providers. They often take active roles in other groups such as Girl or Boy Scouts, PTA and 4-H Clubs.

Recognizing the Importance of Diversity in Family Child Care

One of the segments of the Family Child Care Accreditation Program sponsored by the National Association for Family Child Care is the visit to the family child care home by the NAFCC Validator. Sometimes that Validator fails to recognize and remember the diversity of family child care, particularly when the Validator is another accredited provider.

The Validator thinks the home of the individual in the accreditation process must look and feel like her/his own. That Validator questions how this home can meet the standards for accreditation when it appears so different. [ex: one provider has designated space in her/his home to operate the family child care business while the other provider uses the whole house.]

The Accreditation Program is only for those individuals who have demonstrated a commitment to reach beyond the minimum state or county requirements for health and safety to achieve standards of excellence. Accreditation recognizes that there is and should be differences as well as similarities in quality family child care. It celebrates and supports the diversity of the profession. Two providers can both be offering quality family child care in two different types of settings in two different parts of the country.

What Are the Key Components to Professionalism with Diversity?

The first component is the important role the provider plays in the lives of the children in her/his care. The family child care provider is a primary role model and teacher, second only to the parent(s) themselves. Family child care is often the first group experience for a young child, and that child may spend more waking hours with the family child care provider than with her/his parents.

Providers should continually examine their own attitudes and behaviors with a goal for personal growth in order to be more effective role models for the children in their care. To teach a child to feel strong, capable and lovable, providers must first feel good about who and what they are.

The second component is the partnership between the parent(s) and the provider to promote the positive growth, development and self-esteem of the child that they both love and for whom they share the daily care. Mutual understanding and respect, as well as on-going communication, are vital components in this partnership.

Remembering that a picture is worth a thousand words, the actions of the provider and the parent(s) must reflect what children should learn. Fred Rogers said it very well in 1983:

> We are all different in many ways, but sometimes children are afraid to be different because they want to be like the people they love. Some children may even come to feel there's something wrong with being different. That's why grown-ups need to help children learn that being different is part of what makes them special to the people who love them.

While encouraging professionalism in family child care, it is essential that we keep the "family" in family child care and that we continue to support and celebrate its diversity.

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